

To KNOW Christ and one another more deeply,
To CARE for one another in truth and in love,
To GROW as followers of Jesus.
- CG Mission Statement

Worship: Psalm 111:1-10

(Here is a psalm/song to help your group as you worship.)

Read Psalm 111:1-10 aloud three times. After each reading, spend a few minutes reflecting. After the first reading, open yourself to the presence of God. On the second reading, listen for a certain word or phrase that stands out to you. On the third reading, listen to what God's invitation might be for you.

Icebreaker

What was the first paying job you had growing up?

Text for Discussion: Ecclesiastes 3:16-5:7

Turn in your Bibles and read this passage aloud together.

Aid for Discussion: Sermon Summary

Where can meaning, contentment and joy be found in this life? It's a question each of us yearns to have answered, and one the writer of Ecclesiastes was uniquely suited to address. Wealth, power, fame, wisdom, pleasure – he had them in abundance only to realize that each was fleeting and ultimately hollow. He'd been chasing the wind, and left asking, "Is this all there is?"

It's a familiar feeling. Life isn't fair, and we're incapable of finding (or giving) meaning to it on our own. And yet, most of us live like this isn't the case, ignoring the truth. Of course we do. Confronting this reality can be deeply depressing. But Ecclesiastes' goal isn't despair. It's urging us to persevere, driving us toward fearing God. It's the one fear that frees from every other. Once we know our place in creation, we can grasp the joy and strength found when we settle down in complete dependence on our Father. But for this call to be credible, we must first confront how hard faith can be.

Injustice. Try as we might to do what's right, so often it all goes wrong. Where we expect justice, we're met with injustice and corruption. We desire perfect, instantaneous justice... but should we? We are frail, broken beings – none worthy to stand before the Lord (Ps 130:3) – in desperate need of forgiveness. But we can't ask for mercy for ourselves and justice for everyone else. Whatever grounds we judge another would then condemn us. The Bible promises that one day God will judge. But until then, His patience is a wonderful blessing.

Oppression. Sooner or later, each of us will experience this evil. Which shouldn't surprise us. But this bleak reality isn't meant to drive us away from God. The writer of Ecclesiastes is driving us away from a naive, simplistic faith and toward one that is deeper and truer, centered on the Holy Transcendent love of God.

The poison of Envy. Envy looks at the exterior lives of others and compares that to how we feel inside. Nothing sucks the joy from our present moment more than envy. It robs us of gratitude for what we've already been given, focusing instead on the lie that contentment will come through gain. Contentment will only come by resetting our desires on what God has already given.

Loneliness. While solitude and silence can be good things, loneliness and isolation can be deadly. What drives us to avoid friendship and community? More than anything, the answer is fear – of vulnerability, getting hurt, failure, rejection, and of conflict. But a true friend has seen the worst in us... and stays. They're honest with us, but also vulnerable. There is no self-righteousness in friendship; only compassion, empathy and kindness.

As Christians, we've fallen into misguided expectations for community. If the church is a hospital for messed up people, how can we expect consistency from them any more than we'd expect to find healthy people in a doctor's

waiting room? Yet at the same time, we expect far too little from individual friendships. We don't let others in, so we're left with superficial friendships, unable to navigate or survive conflict, cutting bait right at the moment when the true beauty of friendship could blossom.

Ecclesiastes warns us against dealing with all this hollowness by simply "going to church". This isn't an issue with worship; it's about worshipping hollowly by forgetting Whom we are worshipping. We don't go to church to avoid or suppress the other fears we're running from. We go there so that we might properly learn to fear God. The knowledge that we need saving and that we have been – this is knowing our secure place as God's beloved children. The fear of God is therefore that of a child, yearning to do what pleases our Father who loves us so completely. And it is here that we can truly understand how "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life" (Prov 14:27).

Guiding Question of the Week

(This question is intended as a target for the whole conversation. Do not ask for responses now. It will be repeated later in the study.)

How does the Filial fear of God set us free from every other fear we have?

Questions for Discussion

(Remember it is better to wrestle deeply with two good questions than gloss over many. Sub-bullets are intended for potential follow-up.)

- After reading Ecclesiastes 3:16-5:7, what stood out to you?
- Name a few simple pleasures you enjoyed last week. Do you think God wants to be a part of these experiences? Why or why not?
 - How can gratitude help you be more aware of him in each moment? What can you do to increase your awareness of his presence?
- A repeated phrase in this passage is "under the sun". (vs 3:16; 4:1,3,7,15) What do you understand this phrase to mean?
 - Who and what is not a part of this phrase? (hint: contrast with "above the sun")
 - What is the Teacher's response to "life under the sun"? What is your response?
- Give an example of how the book of Ecclesiastes has driven you toward God and away from the emotions of fear, envy, anxiety, and loneliness?
- How can 4:9-12 reframe our understanding of relationships and friendships? List the benefits of this type of relationship.
 - Why do you think these friends are so rare? How can you be a better friend? Share about one of your true spiritual friends.
 - Discuss how Jesus is our friend and example. (loyal, honest, compassionate, vulnerable etc)
- Name some human fears you have. (other's opinions, inequity, oppression, rivalry, the future, the past etc.) How does the filial fear of God set us free from every other fear we have? (Filial means *of or due from a son or daughter*, devoted, affectionate, loving.)
- Read Ecclesiastes 5:7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10) and the fountain of life (Proverbs 14:27). To fear God means that you know your place and you live in awareness of God's presence and awe at his transcendent holiness. How does the Gospel story increase this reverent fear?

Prayer

Read Ecclesiastes 3:22. Break into groups of three to pray not only for your requests but also that you would rejoice in your work as a gift from God.

Experiment of the week

(A suggestion for engagement in following the way of Jesus this week)

Each morning of the week make a list of worries and fears for the day then immediately surrender them to the God of the Universe. Tell the group or a friend how this exercise influenced you and your faith.